



Krishnan, M. (2018). When is Biography Fiction? Life Writing, Epistemophilia and the Limits of Genre in Contemporary African Writing. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 55(3).  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989418808836>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1177/0021989418808836](https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989418808836)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)  
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Sage at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0021989418808836> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

## University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:  
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

## **When is biography fiction? Life writing, epistemophilia, and the limits of genre in contemporary Kenyan writing**

Madhu Krishnan

### **Abstract**

In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe (2001: 1) opens with the assertion that “[s]peaking rationally about Africa is not something that has ever come naturally”. In this article, I use Mbembe’s remarks as my starting point, using his observations around the place — or lack thereof — of “Africa” within a larger philosophical matrix predicated on Enlightenment-derived notions of knowledge, and applying it to three examples of (auto)biographical life writing recently published by Kenyan authors: Billy Kahora’s *The True Story of David Munyakei*; Kwani Trust’s fifth issue of its flagship *Kwani?* journal, published under the auspices of the Concerned Kenyan Writers group; and Binyavanga Wainaina’s viral 2014 blog post, “I am a homosexual, mum”, fashioned as a “lost chapter” from his 2011 memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*. Through their manipulation of the forms and conventions of biographical writing and biofiction, I argue, these three texts challenge the precepts of reason and rationality which have accompanied the reception of African (here, Kenyan) writing within the

field of the global literary marketplace, with significant implications for the larger place of the African continent within a global imaginary.

**Keywords:** African literature, reason, rationality, life writing, Kenya

In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe (2001: 1) opens with the assertion that “[s]peaking rationally about Africa is not something that has ever come naturally”. In this article, I use Mbembe’s remarks as my starting point, using his observations around the place — or lack thereof — of “Africa” within a larger philosophical matrix predicated on Enlightenment-derived notions of knowledge, and applying it to three examples of (auto)biographical life writing recently published by Kenyan authors: Billy Kahora’s *The True Story of David Munyakei*; Kwani Trust’s fifth issue of its flagship *Kwani?* journal, published under the auspices of the Concerned Kenyan Writers group; and Binyavanga Wainaina’s viral 2014 blog post, “I am a homosexual, mum”, fashioned as a “lost chapter” from his 2011 memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*. Through their manipulation of the forms and conventions of biographical writing and biofiction, I argue, these three texts challenge the precepts of reason and rationality which have accompanied the reception of African (here, Kenyan) writing within the field of the global literary marketplace, with significant implications for the larger place of the African continent within a global imaginary. While refusing to abandon notions

of reason and knowledge *tout court*, each text nonetheless questions the production of simplistic or reified binary categories of (ir)rationality and hierarchies of knowledge, leveraging the aesthetic function of literary writing to open avenues for reading and understanding which function across multi-axial ontological and epistemic frameworks and challenge the ossification of hierarchies of selfhood and self-knowledge.

### **“Thinking” Africa: Reason, modernity and the Enlightenment**

In his commentary, Mbembe captures the extent to which “Africa”, a token and signifier circulating in a Euro-American dominated global imaginary, has been transformed into a discursive apparatus, one which

constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a *negative interpretation*. Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of “human nature.” Or, when it is, its things and attributes are generally of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality. It is this elementariness and primitiveness that makes Africa the world par excellence of all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks of nature in its quest for humankind. (Mbembe, 2001: 1)

Mbembe's observations speak towards a much larger set of debates and criticisms which have emerged in philosophical discourse in recent years and which seek to untangle the complex and often-occluded relationship between Africa, as signifier, and the Enlightenment-derived concepts of reason and rationality as underpinnings to the production of knowledge. In *Critique of Black Reason*), for instance, Mbembe (2017: 7) argues that the Enlightenment project cannot be conceived of as functioning separately from "the fierce colonial desire to divide and classify, to create hierarchies and produce difference", a drive that "leaves behind wounds and scars" which live on in the present era. As Emmanuel C. Eze (2002: 281) notes in his ground-breaking essay, "Answering the Question, 'What Remains of Enlightenment?'" , the Enlightenment, with its "dominant theories and practices of reason, humanity, culture, and civilization" functions explicitly through the division of the world and its peoples into those possessed with the capacity for reason and those without, its

declaration of itself as "the Age of Reason" [...] predicated precisely upon the assumption that reason could only come about as a result of the maturity in a white Europe: those geographically inhabiting the spaces outside Europe, or deemed to be of non-white racial origin, were considered rationally inferior or savage. (Eze, 2002: 283)

What these comments make clear is the extent to which, from Hegel to Kant and beyond, the ordering of the world — and a concomitant ranking of its people — proved indispensable to the larger project of practical reason, rationality and, by extension, knowledge and subjectivity. Put slightly differently, “unable to oversee its own commitment to reason, modern philosophy pursued the pretension of ‘universal reason’ which led to the modernist Enlightenment conviction that the *world itself* has a ‘rational structure’” (Strauss, 2003: 253, emphasis in original) with Europe at its centre, a structuring of the world whose legacies continue to be felt in the present day and bear considerably on the (im)possibility of “thinking” Africa.

If, following Mbembe (2017: 13), we recall that “every time it confronted the question of Blacks and Africa, reason found itself ruined and emptied, turning constantly on itself, shipwrecked in a seemingly inaccessible place where language was destroyed and words themselves no longer had memory”, with Eze we might highlight the extent to which the creation of the ideas of “Africa” and “blackness” themselves have functioned as the excluded centre around which the Enlightenment held:

Enlightenment philosophy was instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing such scientific and popular European perceptions of itself and the rest of the world, and the idea and actual existence of “non-whites” played the role of dialectical opposites of reason and history, enablers of the idea and formation of

“whiteness.” The numerous writings on race – especially the “negro” race – by Locke, Hume, Kant, and Herder were instrumental in articulating Europe’s sense not only of its cultural but also *racial* projects and sense of superiority. This sense of racial mission inherent to Europe remains very evident in philosophical writings of Husserl and Heidegger. In these writings, “Reason” and “Civilization” are synonymous with white people and northern Europe, while unreason and savagery are conveniently located between “blacks” and non-whites. (Eze, 2002: 284, emphasis in original)

Echoing the Fanonian assertion that “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World” (2004/1963: 57), both Eze and Mbembe point to the inextricable link between the concepts of reason and rationality, on the one hand, and the colonialist subjugation of Africa and its peoples, as its necessary foil: the manifestations of violence, degradation, and exploitation found in the slave trade, the plantation economy, the colony become, in this reading, the “baptismal fonts of modernity” (Mbembe, 2017: 13). From these observations arise two significant implications for what follows in this essay. First is the sense that Africa, as a conceptual apparatus (Ferguson, 1990: xv), cannot be adequately thought through the methods of rationality and order derived from Enlightenment thought, which mediate intellectual investigation as currently conceived. This is a sentiment captured in Hamid Dabashi’s provocation, “can non-Europeans think?” For

Dabashi (2015: 31), the self-conscious confidence of universality that characterizes the European philosophical tradition is such that any mode of thought which “operate[s] outside this European philosophical pedigree” cannot be viewed in its own terms, from its own topographies and vantage points; instead, it must remain confined to the world of ethno-inquiry, as an object of study for that European tradition to mine. This failure on the part of European philosophy, moreover, is itself a symptom of its inability to grasp any tradition of thought or knowledge-production which operates outside of the frames of (post)coloniality. At the same time, this inability speaks towards the radical centrality of Africa to the very development of European philosophical thought and, especially, the Enlightenment tradition. If we accept, moreover, Ferguson’s (1990: xv) assertion that “thinking is as ‘real’ an activity as any other, and that ideas and discourses have important and very real social consequences”, then follows a second key implication: that the failure — or, impossibility, in Mbembe’s terms — to “think” Africa and “imagine” Africa unto itself, through its own immanence as a presence and structure, cannot be uncoupled from a larger material history of extraction, despoliation, genocide, and terror which continues to our present-day era of neoliberal humanism. The question of how to represent Africa thus transforms from a question of merely symbolic value into a question which drives to the very heart of knowledge production itself, requiring — if not demanding — a reconstitution of Euro-American notions of



language, reason, and thought with significant implications which extend beyond the discursive into the material world.

### **Position-taking beyond epistemophilia and moving the centre(s)**

In response to this seemingly intractable situation, a number of possible reformulations have arisen which seek to address the challenge of reason in the African context. These range from calls to move from the Kantian notion of practical reason to a conception of ordinary, everyday reason as the basis of moral thought (Eze, 2008); the effort to separate conceptions of reason from rationality such that the former might be seen “on a kind of continuum between the particular and the universal” with the latter as “one particular mode of that configuration of forms of reason, one kind of question one might ask or focus one might have toward reason” (Janz, 2008: 307); to the drive to revise rationality through postmodernism to enable the proliferation of multiple, alternative forms (Higgs, 2001). In this essay, however, I take my cue from Dabashi’s call for a mode of reading which does not presume “the explicit or implicit presence of a European interlocutor” (2015: 2) in my exploration of the blurred lines between fiction and non-fiction in a range of Kenyan life writing. Here, I draw on readings of the fifth issue of *Kwani?*, the flagship publication of Nairobi-based Kwani Trust (Concerned Kenyan Writers, 2008); Billy Kahora’s *The True Story of David Munyakei* (2008); and “I am a homosexual, mum” (2014), in order to argue that the deliberate play of genre,

form, and literariness in these ostensibly factual accounts of biography and autobiography demand an understanding of reason, rationality, and knowledge-production which cannot be assimilated into a singular, centre-periphery topography. I suggest that these works re-order the very boundaries which delimit notions of translatability and understanding and which continue to drive the impoverished global vision of Africa today.

It has become something of a commonplace in postcolonial criticism to draw a correspondence between the reading of postcolonial literatures, broadly construed, and the readerly drive towards epistemophilia, that is, a desire, or quest, for knowledge. The notion that literature might, in its own way, provide unfettered access to the African world is one which has long been both noted and contested in postcolonial and African literary criticism. In *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001) Graham Huggan, for instance, has written that postcolonial writers (a category within which he positions African writers as a subset) straddle the line between acting as “*representers of culture*” and “*cultural representatives*”. For Huggan (2001: 26), “this representativeness [which postcolonial writers face is] a function of their inscription in the margins, of the mainstream demand for an ‘authentic’, but readily translatable, marginal voice”. If, in ethnographic discourse, there is a “generalising tendency to reduce the totality of empire to a type of savagery *already known* and to simultaneously provide careful geographical detail” (Kanneh, 1998: 8, emphasis in original), in literary writing, the asymmetrical location of

the writer and the reader results in a practice of consumption in which complexity is flattened, nuance reduced, and — most critically — the very aestheticism of literary practice is largely erased through its absorption into an ethnographic discursive apparatus which can only homogenize through a seeming imperative to educate, indulging the epistemophilic drive of the touristic gaze. At the heart of the epistemophilic reading of African literature are a series of assumptions around readerly and authorly location; circuits of production and consumption; the questions of authenticity and representation, all of which function against the background of what Pascale Casanova (2004) once termed “the world republic of letters”. It is important, in my view, to position Huggan’s comments not as isolated remarks but rather as part of a larger critical dialogue around the ways in which world literary space has been constituted and the implicit assumptions around aesthetic and material value which it produces. The notion that African literature fulfils some form of epistemophilic satisfaction, then, is not merely a comment on individual readers, writers, and literary works, but part of the larger functioning of the literary field and its imperative towards position-taking. As Pierre Bourdieu (1993: 30) reminds us, “the space of literary or artistic position-takings” is itself inherently a space of relations predicated on struggle and competition over power and capital. It is within this space that the parameters of the “Africa” in African literature are negotiated, and it is within this space that the worlding

of that African world — with all of its implications for its positionality with reference to reason, knowledge, philosophy, and understanding — is undertaken.

The notion that literary writing from outside of Europe might provide an untroubled archive for the development of European knowledge, then, derives directly from the notion, outlined above, that products from outside of Europe function not through their own immanence, but rather as repositories of raw material to be mined for the benefit of European knowledge production. Implicit here are a number of assumptions: first, that non-Europeans (for the purposes of this essay, Africans) cannot “know” themselves in the truest and fullest sense of meaning because of their very inability to think, in Dabashi’s terms; rather, they are made dependent on the enlightened, reasonable, rational European interlocutor to interpret and inform. Second, there is an implication here that rests upon an assumption of total translatability — that is, anything written by an African or other non-European writer must, at its essence, remain fully and transparently exchangeable, assimilable to the modes of knowledge production authenticated in the academies of the global North and predicated on a provincial understanding of these very terms. Finally, there remains a sense in which the very act of writing, irrespective of location, can only function through a mode of address oriented at the European consumer/interpreter/interlocutor. Coupled both with the increasing tendency to typologize African literary writing as merely one subset of world literature — itself a formulation which encourages a mode of thinking based on

translatability, exchange, and possession (Apter, 2013) — and the tendency to ascribe an affective use-value to these “other” literatures, the result has been the ossification of a mode of reading which ironically reinforces the colonialist paradigms it seeks to dismantle.

In the case of biographical fiction, in particular, or indeed life writing more generally, these tendencies are amplified, both through the erroneous notion that literary writing might enable unfettered access to other minds as characteristic of its form (Palmer, 2004), and, more potently, through the idea that the act of “affective mediation” (May, 2008: 908) enabled by reading might transcend social, political, cultural, and geographical distance to allow for the development of human capital through the augmentation of empathetic understanding between individuals (the reader and the subject of biography; the reader and the author). Yet, these very notions rely upon an untroubled and universal understanding of how knowledge functions and a homogenous vision of rationality and reason as the totalizing ground zero of human activity. In the particular contexts of these texts, however, these very precepts are troubled by the historical expulsion of the African continent from the realm of reason and the concomitant impossibility of its expression therein so-often uncritically reproduced in Euro-American philosophical and popular discourse. In what remains of this essay, then, I attempt to interrogate the limits of this framework for reading and understanding the concept of rationality as produced by a range of disparate literary

writings produced on the African continent, and more specifically in Kenya.

Foregrounding questions of genre — particularly those which pertain to the porous borders between “fiction”, “non-fiction”, and “testimony” as narrative forms — my readings in this piece attempt to consider how selected contemporary Kenyan texts might intervene into the debates and fields I have been so far outlining. Recalling Dabashi’s assertions in *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, my interest is in what a careful exploration of these works might enable to emerge in terms of the epistemic and metaphysical frameworks which they produce. Here, I am particularly interested in the ways in which at least two of these, *Kwani? 5* and *The True Story of David Munyakei*, both produced and disseminated in Kenya itself and largely unavailable outside of the African continent, might force a reckoning with the dialogues, discourses, and modes of thought which operate outside of the European gaze’s remit.

### **Kwani Trust and contemporary Kenyan writing beyond the global literary marketplace**

All three of the texts which I am reading in this essay are, in some way, related to Kwani Trust: *Kwani?* is its flagship publication; *The True Story of David Mumyakei* was published by Kwani Trust and written by its managing editor, Billy Kahora, and Binyavanga Wainaina, author of “I am a homosexual, mum”, is the founder of the Trust. In this sense, each contributes to what we might consider as an already-

established dialogue predicated on a longer series of intimate relationships, exchanges, and negotiations. As Kate Wallis, in her meticulous accounting of the Trust's establishment, notes:

Self-defining as a "Kenyan based literary network," the organization evolved out of an expanding email conversation between a group of writers, artists, and those passionate about literature, moderated by filmmaker Wanjiru Kinyanjui, about why new writers weren't being published in Kenya (Kwani Trust, "About Us"). Out of these discussions, which moved to a series of physical conversations in Nairobi (many of which took place in the garden of the *East African* editor Ali Zaidi and sculptor Irene Wanjiru), came the idea to set up a new publishing house (Kwani Trust, "Our History"). (2018: 166)

Wallis points out that, in contrast to those publishing outfits already functioning in Nairobi, Kwani Trust was notable for its self-conscious engagement with world literary space, not as a capitulation to the strictures of the centre-periphery vision of the global literary market (on such strictures, see, for instance, Casanova, 2004; Moretti, 2013; WReC, 2015), but, rather, as a deliberate ploy to forge a claim to universality through the particularity of the Kenyan scene:

Although its primary audience is the Kenyan reading public and Kwani Trust has no established distribution structures outside of Kenya, as Billy Kahora highlighted in a plenary lecture at the 2014 ASAUK conference, from the outset it was consciously concerned with “reaching out of the borders of our national space,” rejecting solely national structures and instead creating “a huge push for the universal” (Kahora) through dialogue with a pan-African and international space of writing, publishing, and prizing. (Wallis, 2018: 166)

The use of the phrase “huge push for the universal” is of particular interest to my arguments in this essay, indicating, as it does, the fabrication of an institutional and epistemic topography based on a series of dialogic and relational exchanges which do not sit easily within the self-conscious universalism of either Enlightenment reason or the world republic of letters. Rather, what emerges in this forensic account of Kwani Trust’s beginnings is an attempt to think differently and to act differently, with a genealogy not based on the precepts of (post)coloniality, but rather on a trajectory and history of pan-African internationalist thought and public life which is not so easily assimilable, its range of claims towards the concept of being in the world themselves resistant to translation or transposition.



Wallis has described the publication of *Kwani?* 5, a special twin issue published in 2007 that was dedicated to exploring the 2007 Kenyan presidential elections and their violent aftermath, as follows:

This twin edition responded to the violence that followed Kenya's 27 December 2007 election, with the journal's inside cover declaring its intention to "provide a collective narrative on what we were before, and what we became, during the epochal first 100 days of 2008" (Kahora, *Kwani?* 05 Part 1). *Kwani?* 05 began life as an intense three-day workshop in early December 2007, bringing together journalists and writers to explore "the techniques of creative non-fiction" for an issue that intended to explore new ways to talk about the electoral process.

However, as Kahora's editorial recalls, when violence then broke out these stories and their deadlines had to be revaluated against more urgent concerns (Kahora, *Kwani?* 05 Part 1 11). Kwani Trust's literary community responded by forming Concerned Kenyan Writers (CKW), a coalition initiated by Kwani Trust's Founding Editor Binyavanga Wainaina that aimed to document and react to the events taking place and whose by-line indicated their purpose — "to use our writing skills to help save Kenya in this polarized time". (Wallis, 2016: 40–41)

Across its pages, *Kwani?* 5 juxtaposes short fiction, poetry, journalistic writing and essays, photography, visual art, cartoons and graphic narratives, and personal testimonials in the form of interviews with participants, victims, and bystanders from across the country so as, in the words of editor Billy Kahora, to “bring questions of Kenyan-ness to the fore, even as ethnic trajectories are explored” (Concerned Kenyan Writers, 2008: 12). Of particular interest for my purposes in this essay are the latter, what have been described in one review “as an alternative repository of stories, memories, and versions of truths that could perhaps guide the country on a path of truth, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation” (Muhoma, 2012: 166). In the first half of the twin edition, on which I will focus my analysis here, these testimonial interviews are divided into five broad sections: Kibera, the Rift Valley, Campus Students (featuring residents from across the country), Kakamega, and Kisii, encompassing just some of Kenya’s vast diversity and difference, across a range of identitarian markers. Set out as journalist interviews in a question-and-answer format, the subjects of the testimonial narratives in *Kwani?* include political party agents, community and relief workers, hired provocateurs and hustlers, religious officials, students, shopkeepers, sex workers, hawkers, and more. Across these texts, repeated themes emerge, foregrounding the role of money in the run-up to the election; the retrospective recognition of the fault-lines subsequently made clear; and the broad and disparate range of institutional and historical legacies which contributed to the violence that broke out. Taken individually,

each of these testimonial interviews functions as a miniature biography of the subject, tracing their lives before the election, experience on election day, and life in its aftermath. At the same time, each roughly regional grouping might be read as a cohesive whole, providing a variegated biographical account read less as a collective testimony or communal memory than as a snapshot of the impossibility of those singular and immutable modes of framing. Read in concert, the five testimonial sections in *Kwani?* 5, then, produce the grounding for a specifically Kenyan epistemology in which knowledge and reason remain utterly situated and continually mutable, shifting in appearance across subjects and regions.

While these are all ostensibly unproblematic factual accounts told by the individuals in question, however, the larger textualization of these interviews suggests that something more complex is at play. By this, I mean two things: first, while each interviewee is identified by a name, age, and location of residence, some feature far more biographical information than others, briefly tracing employment and family history, or trajectories of movement, while others contain scant details and still others note that names have been changed. This diversity in reporting results in a sense, throughout the sections in question, from a simultaneous particularity and universalism in which the individual, while part of a larger bloc by virtue of their inclusion in the series of testimonials, remains singular, both in appearance and in transparency, or lack thereof. The notion of objectivity in reportage, moreover, is undermined across these

pieces by the inclusion of interview questions, allowing for a reading in which biographical data emerges only through a relational mode of inter-subjective exchange in which the self is both co-produced and extended beyond the boundaries of a single body or mind. Equally, any claims to universality forged through these sections remain radically situated. This is not, that is to say, the same mode of universality predicated by the Enlightenment mode of reason, nor is it the violent universality forged by colonialism; rather what appears here are a range of claims made from a sprawling, specific, and irreplicable vantage point whose governing logic and genealogy cannot be reduced to a simple tale of human nature, metaphysical ordering, or centre/periphery topographical mapping. At the same time, the juxtaposition of these snapshots of biographical information alongside a vast range of other generic forms in the issue (see above), forces a sort of interpretative excess which functions entirely at odds with the drive to typologize, categorize, and catalogue, instead creating a mode of reading in which multiple dispositions seep into and across one another.

**Truth and fiction beyond the binary: Billy Kahora's *The True Story of David Munyakei***

The kinds of epistemological unsettling which *Kwani?* 5 produces emerge in a slightly different form in Billy Kahora's *The True Story of David Munyakei*. The non-fiction novella (itself a formal device which suggests an ontological-epistemic decentring)

chronicles the life and, particularly, the final years of its titular character, a junior clerk at the Central Bank of Kenya who rose to infamy as the whistle-blower in the Goldenberg scandal of the 1990s. Published by Kwani Trust in 2008, two years after Munyakei's death in relative poverty and the same year as *Kwani?* 5, the novella takes a deliberately multipolar approach to its subject, leveraging multiple, conflictual temporal vectors in its narrative form. As the back cover of the book explains:

In April 1992, David Sadera Munyakei, a newly employed clerk at the Central Bank of Kenya, started noticing irregularities in the export compensation claims he had been processing. Munyakei's subsequent actions halted the systemic looting of taxpayers' money at the Central Bank and helped save the Kenyan economy from collapse and perhaps ushered a new Kenyan day by exposing what will always remain a dark period in this country's history. For all his efforts all David Sadera Munyakei ever received to date was a continuing per diem and a dark blue suit from Transparency International, a couple of nights at the Lenana Mount, a Nairobi hotel, and a glass award.

The book itself opens with a dedication to Munyakei, listing his years of birth and death, followed, on the next page, by a photograph of the man. In the photograph, Munyakei is rendered in black and white, clad in what, later in the book, would be

referred to as his famous blue suit, gifted to him by Transparency International and worn during his many court appearances. In this photo, Munyakei stands next to a chain-link fence topped by barbed wire, his hand just grazing its barbs, while he himself stares somewhere slightly off in the distance to the right of the frame. Because of its black and white reproduction, the photo is remarkably uniform, with little contrast save for the bright white triangle of Munyakei's shirt, its collar unbuttoned, and only the faintest traces of wisps of clouds in the background. The photo, then, fabricates an image which is at once remarkable and mundane: the suit, a signifier of a kind of aspirational middle-class respectability, its wearer's features difficult to discern but in no way unusual or set apart from an ordinary office worker, with few overt indicators to signal a sense of place or time.

The photo page is followed by a comprehensive cast of characters, categorized by the book's many locations along with a chronology of the major events which it covers. The inclusion of this material is notable for its suggestion of a self-positioning, on the part of the novella, as a specifically and unassailably factual account of one man's life, a roadmap and explanatory guide of sorts to the individual in question and the larger-than-life events which would envelop him. In a literary context in which the notion of translatability has remained fraught, with implications for questions around authority, authorship, and address, the inclusion of these materials might at first seem troubling to any reading which attempts to decentre the function of knowledge-

production with respect to the novella. Indeed, the epistemic and political implications of such modes of glossing have been the subject of some debate in the world of African literary criticism in recent years, often running into larger tensions around the supposed chasm between African writers and their audiences, the latter usually conceived of as based in Europe and North America (Obioma, 2016; Serpell, 2017). Against this backdrop, it would be easy to read the chronological and biographical information produced at the front of *The True Story of David Munyakei* as a capitulation to a global readership, an attempt to overtly educate, soothe, and guide and a recourse to the same modes of reason-based ordering as the colonial episteme. Yet, at the same time, such a reading fails to account for the materiality of the text, particularly its mode of distribution which, as per Kwani Trust's more general strategy, remains centred on Kenya with a deliberate decision not to place its primary focus on the sales of books outside of the continent. This, in turn, enables a different reading of the text, one in which the function of the novella's front matter is less clearly to make transparent and render translatable as it is to trouble these very notions themselves, playing on the tension between the quotidian and the exceptional not as oppositional categories but as integral parts of a whole and presuming to taxonomize that which is quickly revealed as ungovernable. Coupled with the highly-factual, journalistically-inscribed style of the text, this is a strategy based on excess and redundancy, seen, for instance, in long descriptions of the exact coordinates of key locations throughout the story, long sections

of dialogue between characters and court room testimonials in which text originally presented in Swahili is reproduced — word for word — in English, and the insertion of court transcripts without editorial intervention. Almost overwhelming in their force, these textual moments create a framework in which the implied readership is continually situated and unmoored, refusing a simple act of epistemic settlement in a continually-shifting narrative frame, while the idea of factual knowledge itself is continually subject to a kind of self-parody through the sheer excess and repetition of the textual form.

Tellingly, despite the book's ostensible classification as new journalism or creative non-fictional life writing, a review published in *The Africa Report* refers to *The True Story* as “a story that reads like the best of the new Kenyan fiction” (Kantai, 2009). Indeed, throughout the text, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is continually challenged in ways which are both implicit and explicit. The book's opening pages, for instance, trace Munyakei's escape from Nairobi to Mombasa, following the escalation of the Goldenberg scandal, in starkly literary terms. Describing the change in climate as the bus in which Munyakei travels approaches the coastal city, the narrative reads:

But opening the windows did not help; the air was already muggy even at that hour. The effect was sauna-like and the passengers sweated freely. Having left



Nairobi at 10 p.m. the previous night, they began to feel the pressures of the capital city dissipate. Cramps uncramped, uncertainty dissolved as the mixed board of old hands and newcomers to this ancient Port wearily stepped out, blinking in the sun's glare. For those not new to Mombasa the heat was a renewal. For the uninitiated, there was a strange sensation — it seemed that their sense of smell had suddenly disappeared. The humidity blocked the nostrils and sinuses and all senses became one in the warm embrace of the heavy air. As the passengers disembarked, the turnboy laughed, 'Hii ndio Mombasa. Karibu!' As he said this he removed his shirt to expose a bony chest.

'Humanina zenu,' he shouted to no one in particular. (Kahora, 2008: 17–18)

Striking here is the sheer impossibility of any disinterested, fact-based account as a basis for this scene; constructed, as it is, retrospectively from a series of conversations between author and subject — a process which occurred over a period of four months in which Kahora lived with Munyakei and which is chronicled extensively in the book — this scene can only be characterized as a work of imaginative creation. Despite the ostensible accuracy and immediacy of its reliance on direct speech, its own genesis as a fictionalized version of whatever truth it might hold lurks just below the surface. With its focus on the affective and the sensory, that is, evidenced in the feelings, pressures, uncertainty, strangeness, and fatigue felt by the passengers on arrival to the coastal city,

this passage transcends the limits of deductive knowledge in order to foreground another way of knowing, a mode of embodiment whose certainty forms the foundation for a robust process of world-creation that cannot quite be adequately captured through ordinary forms of reason.

This form of transformation, in which the ostensibly non-fictional appears filtered through a lens of fictionality and fictionalization, is apparent across the novella. Early passages recounting Munyakei's courtship with his wife, Mariam, for instance, repeatedly dwell on what the young woman "must have" felt during their early days as a couple, ruminating on what she "probably saw" (2008: 29–30); more explicitly, Munyakei himself becomes a character who straddles fact and fiction. Munyakei's very origins as a mixed race Kenyan — quarter Maasai, quarter white, and half Kikuyu — are described as a mystery, unknown to even his closest friends and family for much of his adulthood, described as a sort of "identity confusion" that is somehow reconciled in "a very Kenyan way":

It's like when I tell people I'm a Maasai – and they know. I've learned, you see, that you don't have to tell people anything. Wanakataa. Wanasema, how come? Hata Mombasa I didn't have to tell them anything, no? They said I was a Mbarawa, they did not know any Maasais. (2008: 32)

The novella thus fabricates a cognitive and epistemic framework based not on the normative orderings of Europe or the global North, but rather settled precisely within the longer discursive and ontological trajectory oriented elsewhere: for instance, Munyakei, as “mixed race”, is defined through a set of codes and conventions around ethnic identity and communal belonging which do not fully translate, oriented as they are within Kenya itself. Munyakei is further described as an unreliable character, one whose stories change and perspective radically alters. As the narrative says, following Goldenberg, “[h]e became an inconvenient hero, yes, but also a shape-shifter of extraordinary ability, all to avoid ‘mkono mrefu wa serikali’. For that he is a study in Kenyan self-exile” (2008: 86). Moving from Maasai to Muslim, possessing multiple languages and voices, Munyakei, the subject of an ostensible work of biography and journalism, is utterly unknowable through any rational or reason-based method. By centring itself on a personage so radically impossible to render transparent, to render readable, *The True Story of David Munyakei* thus extends itself into a study of the inherent unknowability of knowledge itself, decentring the precepts around which its very grounding principles are based.

### **Towards a pluriverse of knowledge and knowing**

In contrast to *Kwani?* 5 and *The True Story of David Munyakei*, Binyavanga Wainaina’s “I am a homosexual, mum” is a text with a deliberately global reach. The so-called “lost

chapter” from *One Day I Will Write about This Place*, Wainaina’s acclaimed 2011 memoir, was published in 2014 on the popular blog *Africa Is a Country* and received significant attention largely both because of its dual purpose as a piece of literary writing and a high-profile coming-out narrative, and due to its subsequent republication in *The Guardian*. The short text imagines an alternate reality in which the author, at the time living in South Africa, instead remains in Kenya, by his mother’s side on her deathbed, able, as she lies unconscious, to confess a truth to her that he had known since the age of five:

This is not the right version of events

Hey mum. I was putting my head on her shoulder, that last afternoon before she died. She was lying on her hospital bed. Kenyatta. Intensive Care. Critical Care. There. Because this time I will not be away in South Africa, fucking things up in that chaotic way of mine. I will arrive on time, and be there when she dies. My heart arrives on time. I am holding my dying mother’s hand. I am lifting her hand. Her hand will be swollen with diabetes. Her organs are failing. Hey mum. Ooooh. My mind sighs. My heart! I am whispering in her ear. She is awake, listening, soft calm loving, with my head right inside in her breathspace. She is so big – my mother, in this world, near the next world, each breath slow, but steady, as it should be. Inhale. She can carry everything. I will whisper, louder,

in my minds-breath. To hers. She will listen, even if she doesn't hear. Can she?

(2014: n.p.)

Despite its opening sentences, which foreground its fictionality in stark terms, the story fabricates an affective frame in which the juxtaposition of "right" and "not right" events produces a troubling of the notions of truth as authority, made plain when, following his imagined confession, the narrator switches to "the right version":

I am living in South Africa, without having seen my mother for five years, even though she is sick, because I am afraid and ashamed, and because I will be thirty years old and possibly without a visa to return here if I leave. I am hurricaning to move my life so I can see her. But she is in Nakuru, collapsing, and they will be rushing her kidneys to Kenyatta Hospital in Nairobi, where there will be a dialysis machine and a tropical storm of experts awaiting her. (2014: n.p.)

Placing these two versions of events together into a single sequential narrative, the lost chapter produces a framework in which the interpretative guide for fact becomes fiction and vice versa, writing and re-scribing the limits of a life and its story to throw into question easy epistemic orderings and temporal progressions. Seen through the lens of Wainaina's memoir as a whole, a work which functions to fabricate a multipolar

pluriverse through its play with (af)filiation, form and affect (Krishnan, 2013), the lost chapter thus enables a similar effect in which the questions of knowledge and reason are reframed from the locus of the inscrutable, rooted, multitudinous, and utterly coherent self. This is a mode of self-knowledge and self-writing in which inconsistency marks not a lack of order, but rather the fullness of being, emerging from an epistemic foundation utterly unconcerned with anything resembling a normative functioning, leveraging the expansive horizons of life writing to do so.

To return to the passage with which I began this essay, Mbembe continues to argue that

it is in relation to Africa that the notion of “absolute otherness” has been taken farthest. It is now widely acknowledged that Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West’s desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world. In several respects, Africa still constitutes one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity. And Africa, because it was and remains that fissure between what the West is, what it thinks it represents, and what it thinks it signifies, is not simply *part of* its imaginary significations, it is *one of* those significations. By

imaginary significations, we mean “that something invented” that, paradoxically, becomes necessary because “that something” plays a key role, both in the world the West constitutes for itself and in the West’s apologetic concerns and exclusionary and brutal practices towards others. (2001: 2, emphasis in original)

Central to Mbembe’s diagnosis of the place of Africa in the world and the work of black reason across his oeuvre has been an understanding of reason, rationality, and the ordering of the world as located in the European tradition, that same tradition which, as Dabashi (2015) reminds us, renders itself blind in its inability to decentre its own vantage points. Set against this larger discursive tradition of thinking or imagining Africa, the signifier, it is this same topographical mapping which has driven dominant reading practices enabled by the world republic of letters. Yet, this is but one mode of understanding and interpretation which, as the texts which I have been reading demonstrate, functions in concert with a range of other formations. These works, by contrast, might not be so easily positioned within a single — and singular — field of epistemic or cultural production, blurring generic distinctions and displacing the dualistic notion of truth and truth-value such as to re-frame and re-orient the very act of knowledge production, gesturing towards their genesis beyond the framework of (post)coloniality. Leveraging the form of biographical writing, these narratives produce

a means of considering the very basis of self-hood beyond the vestiges of the Enlightenment project, drawing upon a set of epistemic underpinnings which function not as an extension, precursor, or corollary to the former, but as something else entirely, something which, while not functioning simply as the negative pole of a binary, enlivens Walter Mignolo's (2015: xlii) call for a pluriverse through which universality might show its multitudinous face.

## References

- Apter E (2013) *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso.
- Bourdieu P (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production*. Johnson R (ed) DuVerlie C, Newman C, Nice R, Parkhurst P, Parnell J, and Swyer R (trans) Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Casanova P (2004) *The World Republic of Letters*. DeBevoise MB (trans) Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Concerned Kenyan Writers (2008) *Kwani?* 5. Nairobi: Kwani Trust.
- Dabashi H (2015) *Can Non-Europeans Think?* London: Zed.
- Eze EC (2002) Answering the question, 'what remains of Enlightenment?' *Human Studies* 25(3): 281–88.



- Eze EC (2008) Between history and the gods: Reason, morality, and politics in today's Africa. *Africa Today* 55(2): 77–94.
- Fanon F (2004/1963) *The Wretched of the Earth*. Farrington C (trans) New York: Grove Press.
- Ferguson J (1990) *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Higgs P (2001) African philosophy and postmodern rationality. *South Africa Journal of Philosophy* 20(2): 215–26.
- Huggan G (2001) *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge.
- Janz BB (2008) Reason and rationality in Eze's *On Reason*. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27(4): 296–309.
- Kahora B (2008) *The True Story of David Munyakei*. Nairobi: Kwani Trust.
- Kanneh K (1998) *African Identities: Race, Nation, and Culture in Ethnography, Pan-Africanism, and Black Literatures*. London: Routledge.
- Kantai P (2009) Review: *The True Story of David Munyakei* by Billy Kahora. *The Africa Report*. Available at: <http://www.theafricareport.com/Society-and-Culture/review-the-true-story-of-david-munyakei-by-billy-kahora.html> (accessed 24 March 2018).
- Krishnan M (2013) Affiliation, disavowal and national commitment in third generation African literature. *Ariel* 44(1): 73–97.

Kwani Trust (n.d.) About Us. Available at:

<http://kwani.org/aboutus/kwani.htm> (accessed 24 March 2018).

Kwani Trust (n.d.) Our History. Available at:

<http://kwani.org/our-history/kwani.htm> (accessed 24 March 2018).

May B (2008) Extravagant postcolonialism: Ethics and individualism in anglophonic, anglocentric postcolonial fiction: Or, “what was (this) postcolonialism?” *ELH* 75(4): 899–937.

Mbembe A (2011) *On the Postcolony*. Berrett AM, Last M, Rendall S, and Roitman J (trans) Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mbembe A (2017) *Critique of Black Reason*. Dubois L (trans) Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mignolo W (2015) Foreword: Yes we can. In: Dabashi H *Can Non-Europeans Think?* London: Zed.

Moretti F (2013) *Distant Reading*. London: Verso.

Muhoma C (2012) Versions of truth and collective memory: The quest for forgiveness and healing in the context of Kenya’s postelection violence. *Research in African Literatures* 43(1): 166–73.

Obioma C (2016) Who should I write for – Nigerians, Africans, or everyone? *Guardian*. Available at:

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/14/how-african-writers-can-bring-local-language-to-life-for-all> (accessed 15 January 2018).

Palmer A (2004) *Fictional Minds*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Serpell N (2017) Glossing Africa. *New York Review of Books*. Available at:

<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/08/21/glossing-africa/> (accessed 15 January 2018).

Strauss DFM (2003) How “rational” is “rationality”? *South African Journal of Philosophy* 22(3): 247–67.

Wainaina B (2011) *One Day I Will Write about This Place*. London: Granta.

Wainaina B (2014) I’m a homosexual, mum. *Africa Is a Country*. Available at:

<http://africasacountry.com/2014/01/i-am-a-homosexual-mum/> (accessed 15 January 2018).

Wallis K (2016) How books matter. *Wasafiri* 31(4): 39–46.

Wallis K (2018) Exchanges in Nairobi and Lagos: Literary networks and world literary space. *Research in African Literatures* 49(1): 163–86.

Warwick Research Collective (WReC) (2015) *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.